

## History of USS LEXINGTON (AVT-16)

Few ships have a history as colorful as LEXINGTON's. She's served her country in war and peace for more than 40 years. Since 1962, she's been the Navy's only training carrier, qualifying thousands of aviators. In battle, she earned the nickname "Blue Ghost" for mystifying the Japanese attackers who often reported her sunk. The fifth American warship to be called LEXINGTON, "The Lady Lex" has a rich tradition dating back to the Revolutionary War.

The first ship to be named LEXINGTON was commissioned in March of 1776. This 86 foot vessel was so dubbed in honor of the Minutemen of Lexington, Massachusetts who fired at the British "the shot heard 'round the world." In the year and a half that she fought for the patriot cause, this 16-gun brig mounted an impressive record. While harassing British commerce in the English Channel and along the coast of France, LEXINGTON captured 18 ships. After a gallant fight with two of the enemy, she was taken in September of 1777.

A 691-ton, 127-foot sloop-of-war was commissioned the second LEXINGTON in 1826. She didn't come under fire until 20 years later. During the Mexican War of 1846-47 she served admirably, transporting troops and assisting in blockade duty. Her crowning achievement came when Commodore Matthew C. Perry included her on his famous expedition to Japan. A year after completing that historic journey, she was decommissioned in 1855.

In August of 1861, the Union Army purchased the third LEXINGTON. An ironclad sidewheel steamer measuring 177 feet long, this gunboat was soon transferred to the Navy and operated on the Mississippi River. There she played an important role in several of General U.S. Grant's early victories of the Civil War. She is credited by some historians for helping Union forces turn the tide during the Battle of Shiloh in 1862. Valuable service was also rendered by LEXINGTON in the battle for Vicksburg. She was decommissioned in June of 1865.

More than half-a-century later, the fourth LEXINGTON (CV-2) ushered in a new era in Naval warfare. Commissioned in December of 1927 as an aircraft carrier, LEXINGTON was originally designed as a battlecruiser. Treaty obligations and the development of airpower mandated the change. Weighing 33,000 tons and measuring nearly 900 feet in length, LEXINGTON, along with her sister ship SARATOGA (CV-3), were the largest and fastest (35 knots) warships afloat. Over the next 14 years, the Navy's aerial tactics were developed and refined aboard these carriers. They also trained most of the top Admirals and flight commanders of World War II. LEXINGTON's own involvement in the war was brief and sad. Early on, she launched air strikes in the Southwest Pacific. In May of 1942, she and the YORKTOWN (CV-5) moved to intercept an enemy task force in the Coral Sea. On May 8th, LEXINGTON was attacked by Japanese planes. The ship dodged nine out of the eleven torpedoes fired at her in as many seconds. A 1,000 pound bomb wrecked her forward port five inch battery, killing the crew. Another hit and several misses caused more damage. The shooting stopped nine minutes later. The ship was wounded but it had seemingly survived. Then she was suddenly rocked by a series of internal explosions. Gasoline fumes escaping from ruptured lines below decks were apparently ignited by a spark. Engulfed in flames, LEXINGTON had to be abandoned. Although 92 per cent of the ship's complement escaped, 216 men went down with her. Even in defeat, this sturdy ship died hard. She finally had to be sent to the bottom with torpedoes from one of her own destroyers.

Back in Quincy, Massachusetts, the Bethlehem Steel Company was building a new carrier, the CABOT. When the sinking of LEXINGTON was reported, the 23,000 workers at the Fore River Shipyard petitioned the Navy to rename her in honor of her fallen mother. Finished nearly two years ahead of schedule, the fifth LEXINGTON (CV-16) was commissioned February 17, 1943. She was the second ESSEX-class carrier to sail into combat. More maneuverable and better armed than her predecessor, LEXINGTON joined her sister ships ESSEX, YORKTOWN and HORNET in the Pacific. Along with other new combatants, these carriers enabled the Navy to go from a defensive to an offensive posture. It was a relentless offensive that went unchecked during the last two years of the war.

LEXINGTON's first contact with the enemy came in the Fall of 1943. She took part in raids on Tarawa and Wake Island. In December, major action erupted near the Gilbert Islands. Controlling the air and protecting the landing Marines were the ships' primary duties. Then while other carriers continued to shield the the Marines LEXINGTON struck enemy airfields on Kwajalein and Roi. On the night of December 3rd, using a full moon to illuminate their target, Japanese planes attacked the ship. One plane scored a torpedo hit on the ships' stern, killing nine and wounding 35 men. The blast also jammed her rudder hard left, causing her to circle to port. Serious damage was done but she wasn't in danger of sinking. She soon straightened her rudder and with three propeller shafts intact she returned to Pearl Harbor for repairs. Two months later she was on her way back to war.

By now, LEXINGTON was well known to friend and foe. She was the only ESSEX-class carrier to wear the basic shades of blue-grey paint. Most other ships wore creative camouflage designs. Her color and her resilience garnered her the aforementioned nick name she retains.

Her return to combat found LEXINGTON in battles near New Guinea, Truk, Saipan, and the Phillippine Sea. She also was engaged in operations off Cape Engano where four enemy carriers were sunk in October of 1944. Two of those ships, ZUIKAKU and SHOKAKU, had fatally wounded the old LEXINGTON two years before. CV-16's namesake was finally revenged.

On November 6th, near Luzon, LEXINGTON was the fourth fast carrier to take a Kamikaze hit. Four zeroes dived at her but anti-aircraft fire downed three of them. The fourth smashed the starboard side of the ship, killing nearly fifty men and injuring one hundred and thirty. But the ship miraculously managed to maintain her speed and continue flight operations.

Two and a half years of combat brought LEXINGTON 11 battle stars. Only two other carriers exceeded that total. She was also one of six carriers to receive the Presidential Unit Citation. During her war service, LEXINGTON destroyed more than 1,000 enemy planes, sunk 300,000 tons of Japanese shipping and damaged another 600,000.

The end of World War II brought a massive cut-back in the strength of our Armed Forces. On October 11, 1946, as part of this scaling down effort, LEXINGTON was decommissioned. She was than transferred to the Washington State Reserve Fleet.

In 1952, she was re-designated an Attack Carrier (CVA), but remained in mothballs until September 1953. That's when she moved to the Puget Sound Shipyard for modernization. Two years later, she emerged a totally different ship. She now sported an angled deck and other new equipment. After her recommissioning in August of 1955, LEXINGTON returned to her old Pacific battleground. But this time her mission was different. Communist threats had made the Far East unstable. Preserving the peace was

now the role of the Seventh Fleet. For the next seven years, LEXINGTON trained in anti-submarine warfare, participated in exercises and maneuvers, conducted search and rescue missions, showed the flag at Asian ports and pointed her bow toward several world trouble spots in that cold-war era.

On her way to a yard period in New York, LEXINGTON made a 15,000 mile journey from San Diego to the Atlantic coast by way of Cape Horn. When she made this trip in July of 1962 she became the first carrier known to have conducted operations in those dangerous waters.

After being reclassified as an ASW Support Carrier (CVS), LEXINGTON was scheduled to deploy to Pensacola, Florida, where she was to relieve ANTIETAM as the Navy's training carrier. But the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 changed her plans. Although she still had some yard time left, she was ordered to get underway. She left New York and headed for Norfolk, Virginia where she embarked an air group. Mayport, Florida was her next stop. As negotiations eased the Cuban tension, LEXINGTON conducted operations in the Jacksonville area. When the crisis ended, she was released to carry out her original orders. On December 20, 1962 she reported to Pensacola, where she assumed her present mission as training carrier for the Naval Air Training Command. Since receiving her subsequent CVT and AVT designations, LEXINGTON has trained an astronomical number of pilots. In 1980, she recorded her 400,000th arrested landing and became the first carrier in Naval History to reach that goal. Since she still averages 1,500 landings per month it's not likely she'll ever be surpassed. Like the Minutemen of old and her seaworthy namesakes, "The Lady Lex" stands ready to serve.